

the most important criteria, more so than being literate or having qualifications. When Mobile Crèches was established in 1969, all that was asked of the workers was an ability to nurture and some basic home running skills. Since then much has changed, and the current training programme is the product of a dialogue between academic principles and sound practice demonstrated by the field workers. While the workers must be able to create an environment that is supportive, loving and enabling, their focus must always be on developing children's critical thinking skills. The curriculum, too, has been planned on the basis of methods born of years of experience of effective early childhood care and education. The crèche workers undergo rigorous training, which lasts between 6 and 12 months. It is on-the-job and is reinforced by a continuous programme, which brings field experience and theory together. The trainees learn to care for and stimulate the children, and in particular, learn how to conduct activities that foster cognitive development. These are based on five major principles: experiential learning; working from simple to complex; working from concrete to abstract, familiar to unfamiliar; and learning through play.

These five major principles are worked through in three different steps. The first step is to provide the children with opportunities for expression, in which they will be listened to without judgement. In the second step, the emphasis is on exposure and building experience. This is when the children are taken on outings, they hear and tell stories, they read books, they eat different foods. In the third step a topic is selected and discussed for a month. Initially that topic is examined in a way that the children can relate it to their everyday lives. They discuss it in terms of how it affects themselves, their families and communities, and what its implications are in terms of their gender and their roles in their families and society. They then look at the topic in a wider context. For example, its role vis-à-vis environmental factors such as plant life, ecological linkages, environmental threats and possible solutions. In the Mobile Crèches curriculum, the crèche workers consistently build on the last stage that the children have reached, before moving to a new stage.

Mobile Crèches invests in the children in the hope that once they develop the ability to think critically, they will be able to carry it through in the rest of their lives and will benefit from it. While it is hard with such a transient population to know what happens to the children after they leave Mobile Crèches, there are regular reports from surrounding schools that the children from Mobile Crèches show a special ability for leadership and creativity. In the longer term, some of the children have successfully struggled against the odds to enter a wide variety of professions. One is a policewoman, another an artist with an advertising agency, and others have become computer operators or garage mechanics. These people are living examples of how critical thinking developed in early childhood, together with other factors, leads to success in the long run. Even for children born into dire poverty.

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Mozambique

Critical thinking skills and HIV/AIDS

Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento (CFD) means children, family and development. CFD is an NGO in Mozambique that focuses on early childhood development rooted in community action. Over the last two or three years, much of its work has turned to working with children and families in an HIV/AIDS context. Many of the communities that CFD works with are located in the rural areas along the 'Maputo Corridor', which, with an estimated prevalence of over 20%, has become the country's HIV/AIDS hot spot. This feature is drawn from a telephone interview with Agostinho Mamade, Director of CFD; and from Integrating HIV/AIDS Education into Early Childhood Development. A Curriculum of Living Well: for children, families and educators (2002), Associação Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento, Maputo, Mozambique; and the CD-ROM on the HIV/AIDS work of the Associação Criança, Família e Desenvolvimento, produced by Louise Vaz, Hine Fellow, Centre for Documentary Studies, Duke University, USA.

As in many other places, most HIV/AIDS work in Mozambique concentrated on youths and adults, while younger children were completely left out. CFD saw not only that young children are aware of HIV/AIDS in their communities, but also that they start becoming involved in risky behaviour themselves at a younger age than many adults think. Given the limited resources available, CFD believes that one of the most effective and long-term ways of dealing with the pandemic is to make young children aware of preventive behaviour, thus reducing the risk of contracting the disease later in life. It therefore increasingly emphasises the development of critical thinking skills in children and communities. CFD feels strongly that education can help reduce children's vulnerability, by providing them with the knowledge to make positive decisions about

themselves and to develop empathy for those who are infected or affected. As thinking individuals who are capable of expressing themselves, children too must have a say on matters and decisions which affect their lives and the communities which they are part of.

CFD is certainly not the only institution that believes that young children cannot be ignored in discussions about HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention. The debate, however, is often about the appropriate age to begin teaching children about the virus and the syndrome. CFD's experiences in Mozambique indicate that most communities believe that HIV/AIDS education should begin at pre-adolescence, about 9 to 10 years of age. With this age group, much of the discussion focuses on sex and intravenous drug use. CFD, however, believes that it should also look at what has gone awry with society, communities, families and personal relationships. It therefore concentrates on developing the attitudes, behaviours and values that can help reduce the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS later in life, and believes that they can be learned by children as young as three years of age. In this way, social changes will be set in motion that will help overcome the disease in the long term.

Drawing on their experience in working with children in other areas, CFD and its partner educators in the rural communities found that the best way to address HIV/AIDS in the *escolinha* (preschool) setting is not to focus on the 'problems' associated with it, such as unprotected sex, drug abuse, rape, discrimination and so on, which weigh heavy on young minds. Rather, the focus should be on the root of these problems: raising the children's self-esteem and teaching them to respect others, to take care of those who are ill, to share, be tolerant

and so on. There are many benefits to be derived from concentrating on the root cause of problems instead of on the problems themselves, and these can be extended to a number of other health and social issues affecting children that will improve their general well-being.

Based on its experience of working with communities and with the staff and children of its *escolinhas*, CFD developed a manual for parents, adults and *escolinha* workers to start a dialogue with children on HIV/AIDS. This manual is called *A Curriculum of Living Well: for children, families and educators*. Its intention is to start by looking at the social and biological factors associated with HIV/AIDS, to empower young children to reflect on the many issues surrounding the epidemic and to equip them with the thinking skills and life skills necessary to make responsible decisions in the future. This is done by suggesting various activities for adults to do together with children. They are all based on a scenario or game, followed by a guided discussion on what lessons could be learned.

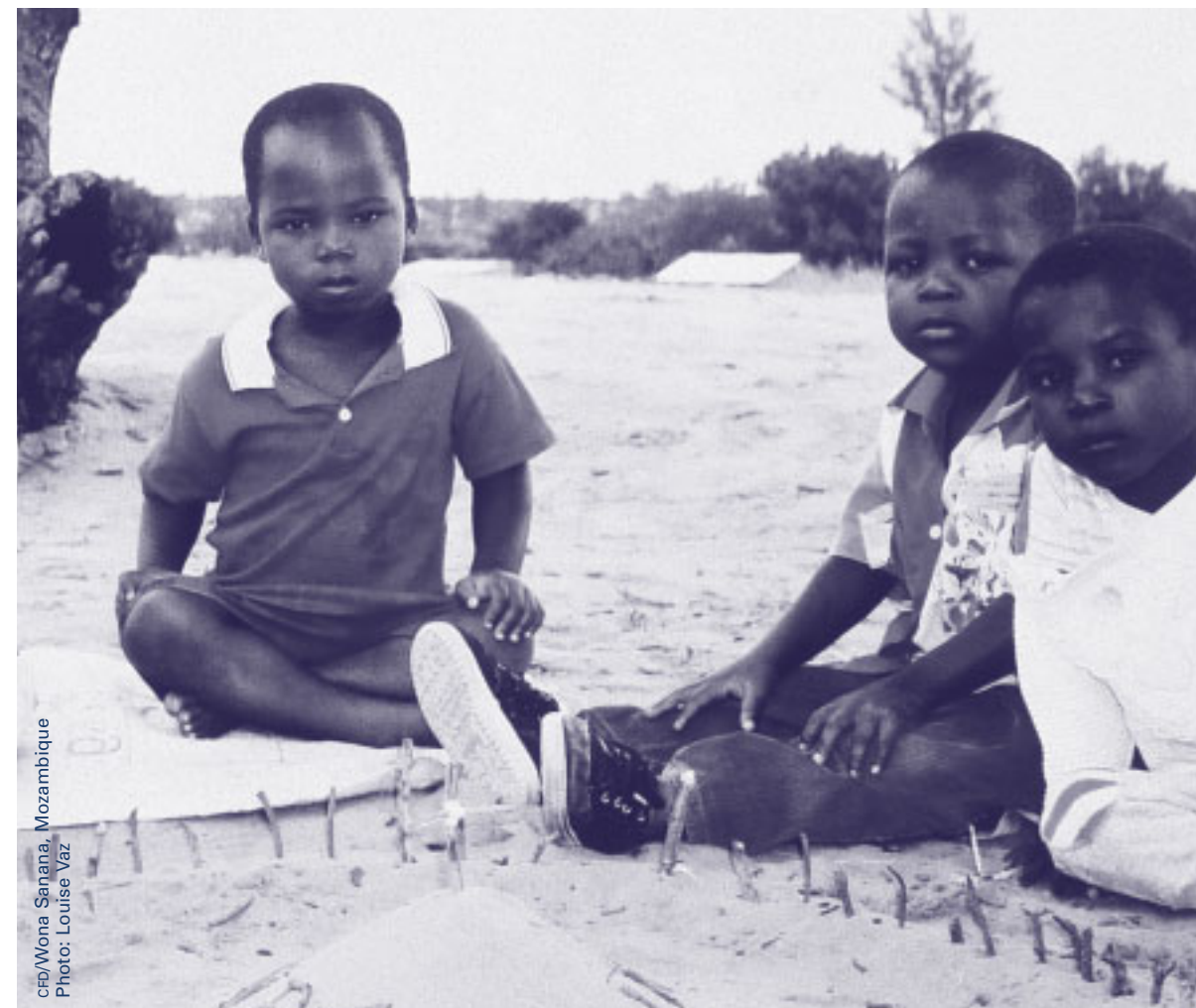
Through the games and the discussions that follow, the children are asked to think about the given situation, analyse the impact it may have on themselves or those around them, and express their feelings about it. The whole approach in *A Curriculum of Living Well* is positive. All the activities, games, songs, dances and drama featured in it were designed by CFD staff and educators to address issues related to HIV/AIDS and to reinforce concepts that include friendship, love, caring for others, respect, expressing emotions, conflict resolution and negotiation skills. Parents are encouraged to participate at all times, so that the learning process continues at home and expands to others in the community.

It is widely recognised that the earliest years of a child's life are the most influential, and working with these concepts with such young children might lead to positive choices at a later stage. Children learn behaviours and values while they are young, and these become increasingly more difficult to change as they grow older. Ideally, the root cause of the behaviour must be sought and dealt with, and not just the behaviour itself. As a result of CFD's work with the Curriculum of Living Well and in

fostering thinking skills, young children are starting to question adults' behaviour. They see, in an HIV/AIDS context for example, that adults may have multiple partners or be engaging in unsafe practices. In turn, the adults see that the children are learning by watching and picking up these behaviours and exposing themselves to dangers, too. The adults recognise that they need to change their own practices in order to have a positive influence on the children.

CFD believes that attitudes, behaviours and values that can have an impact later in life with regard to reducing risk for HIV/AIDS can be learned by children starting as early as three years of age

The children thus trigger the adults into looking differently at their communities, seeing their assets, strengths and drawbacks. This ultimately leads to a community which is a learning place for children. In CFD's experience, working with critical thinking in children has had a ripple effect: community members see things that are not right and think about them, while perhaps previously they may have just accepted them. They then start to realise how important it is for the children, who learn from their surroundings, to be in positive surroundings, and they start to act and put these things right. People see that children are able to analyse the rights and wrongs in their own community. As their thinking skills develop, the children pressure adults to give responses to their questions. They do not accept being told that the adult doesn't have time, or doesn't want to discuss something. The parents start to respond to the children and become more open to them. The children push the adults into thinking more about the implications of their behaviour and how to change it. CFD talks a lot to parents about their children, and they often hear that their children are more active, ask more questions, and exert more pressure on their parents to get answers. The children are thinking about the world around them, and are trying to find the right way of being for themselves.



CFD/Wona Sanana, Mozambique
Photo: Louise Vaz

Children must be helped to understand the consequences of their actions, to care for others and to develop empathy

A culture of values and conditions must be created that will help children seek alternatives to situations and resolve problems. Children must be helped to understand the consequences of their actions, to care for others and to develop empathy. This can be stimulated by giving children affection and love, and encouraging them to express their emotions and frustrations and be taken seriously. CFD believes that if children develop these important human qualities early on, they will be able to think critically about their actions and their consequences, and not resort to negative behaviour in the future. If children are empowered with the tools they need to make good decisions that will affect themselves and others, they will be helped to create behaviour patterns that

will make them less likely to engage in unsafe or compromising situations, thus decreasing their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS in the future.

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